

S Kelner, *To Jerusalem and Back*. MacMillan, London, 1996. pp. 172.

‘I mourn the transformation of Rugby League from a community-based sport to another branch of the entertainment industry . . . ’ (David Storey, *This Sporting Life*)

Simon Kelner’s *To Jerusalem and Back* highlights the role of working-class culture, community identity, and notions of shared ‘traditional values’ in British Rugby League. It is an extremely entertaining popular account and analysis of the events surrounding the 1995 £87 million deal which gave Rupert Murdoch’s BSkyB satellite TV Channel, part of his News Limited global media empire, a five-year contract for coverage rights to British Rugby League, or as it is now known, Euro Super League. At the heart of Kelner’s account are the varied individual and community reactions to Super League within Northern England localities (some of which have supported League clubs since 1895) of turbulence and protest, melancholy resignation, or qualified acceptance. It offers a fascinating case study of how local sporting conditions, cultures and histories react to, interpret, and negotiate globalising and commodifying forces presented by multinational media conglomerates. Certainly, it provides an enlightening comparative context in which to consider the events and conditions Super League has initiated in Australia.

The title, *From Here to Jerusalem*, is drawn from an 1804 poem by William Blake, and his ‘rage’ against the spiritual desolation wrought by industrialisation on the workers of Britain. The Super League competition is said to offer a similar desolation with its all-too-obvious commercial and media imperatives. It treats rugby league purely as a commodity, dehumanises its ‘essential’ sporting qualities, and contributes to a process whereby years of stultifying Conservative Government rule and free-market ideology have led to a ‘gradual homogenization’ of northern towns and culture. Kelner takes us through the fortunes of his own club, Swinton, and the role it has played within the formation of his personal identity, family relationships, and wider community loyalties. This chapter, ‘Man and Boy’, is a compelling example of the intersection between the collective experience of social (sporting) events, and their role in the construction of personal memory and identity. An historical account of League’s development in England contextualises the rise of Super League, with the second part of this history (from 1970 on) detailing the commercial decline of British League. It is this decline which created

the commercial vulnerability required for a successful 'takeover' by News Limited. The 'birth' of Super League, and the accompanying community outcries, are followed by an interview and profile of the 'architect' of the Murdoch deal, Chief Executive of Euro Super League, Maurice Lindsay. The final chapter examines the initial Super League media coverage and games and allows several influential figures their say both for and against the new code with incisive analysis coming from author Geoffrey Moorhouse in particular.

A key focus of the book is upon the commodification processes and effects that League has been subject to through News Limited. These include a perceived over-emphasis on League as a television spectacle, a switch from winter to summer competition, club mergers and team rationalisation, adoption of insipid American team monikers including Hawks, Gladiators, Centurions, and Blue Sox, suggestions that the words 'Rugby League' should be dropped altogether, and the introduction of cheerleaders and 'tacky' pre-match entertainment. Structural change is evident through League boss, Maurice Lindsay, adopting the management techniques of many American professional sports organisations. None of this is seen as having much relevance to traditional 'local' northern League audiences, and who interpret it as an affront to their working-class traditions and values. The ultimate conclusion is that the sport is simply viewed as a pay television commodity. It has been 'marketised' with new and expanding national and global audiences in mind, providing evidence of a new order whereby a media company is dominant and League administrators subsidiary. The worry for Kelner is whether this 'marketisation' offers any long-term future for League. If Super League does not attract enough subscribers on pay TV at the end of its five-year contract, will News Limited simply drop League and send it back to the northern communities which may have long since lost interest?

It is the role of League in northern England which is the focus of Kelner's analysis. Always identified with the north, League, he argues, took on immense cultural and social importance as a 'means of expression, as a badge of regional identity' during the Thatcher administration in which northern coal mining collapsed, traditional heavy industry was dismantled, and antiunion policy implemented. Murdoch's Super League is viewed as an extension of such moves as it debases the British working-class history and culture which made League what it is. Moreover, the proposed club mergers demanded by the new media controller for its

new competition were quite literally seen as the possible 'death of some communities. The public outcry and protests that followed even reached the House of Commons. A compromise was reached with less radical team rationalisation resulting. This satisfied some within League and most were at least thankful that the sport had not been split down the middle as in Australia. The acceptance of a compromise by a powerful multinational media company such as News Limited illustrates how local cultures contend with and interpret globalising and commodifying influences and processes. In this case, northern League communities served as a site of resistance to perceived unwelcome non-indigenous corrupting forces, and are an example of how such influences 'must negotiate the specific local histories and conditions within which sports are fashioned' in order to establish themselves.¹

The strength of *To Jerusalem and Back* lays in the passion of its argument. The unabashed polemic boldly questions many of the changes Euro Super League has made to League's form and content, and its associated social and cultural structures and practices. The level of argument may be interpreted as a weakness, but it should be remembered that this volume aims only to be a popular account. What it offers is a wonderful opportunity for historians and sociologists to launch substantive empirical, historical and theoretically-informed investigations of the events Kelner describes and analyses.

The major shortcoming of Kelner's analysis is his repeated argument that Super League has removed the 'honesty', 'substance' and 'essential nature' of the sport without ever drawing together an identifiable definition of this 'essential nature'. The frequent reinforcement of this case surely calls for some form of tightly defined analytical synthesis. Besides this, Kelner's history of League could have been more comprehensive, and some treatment of the role of women in northern League culture would have been interesting. However, these weaknesses do not greatly detract from the quality and worth of this book.

To Jerusalem and Back is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the events that have led to the establishment of Super League as the dominant League force globally, and that has re-shaped the sport forever. It is excellent source material for anyone seeking to examine the historical, social, cultural, political, and commodifying forces that

intertwine in the processes producing sport as an interdependently constituted local, regional, national and global 'mediated product'.

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Note:

- 1 D Rowe, G Lawrence, T Miller and J McKay, 'Global Sport? Core Concern and Peripheral Vision', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1994, p. 663; B Hutchins, 'Rugby Wars: The Changing Face of Football', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 1, Nov. 1996, p. 156.